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DEPT FOR SCA/CEN (M. O'MARA), DRL/PHD (C. KUCHTA-HELBLING)

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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: AUTHORITIES EXECUTE SURPRISE DEMOLITION OF HARE KRISHNA HOMES

REF: ALMATY 3143

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11. (U) Summary: On the afternoon of November 21, local officials in the Karasai district near Almaty blockaded a Hare Krishna commune, forcibly evicted residents from their homes, seized their personal possessions, beat and arrested several Hare Krishna followers, and demolished 13 homes. Karasai district officials carried out the demolitions despite the fact that a special Ministry of Justice commission organized to evaluate the situation has yet to issue its findings. End summary.

AUTHORITIES AGGRESSIVELY EXECUTE SURPRISE DEMOLITION

12. (U) The Karasai district akim and his officials escalated their long-running land dispute with the Hare Krishnas on November 20, when an unidentified official served court documents on a security guard at the Hare Krishna commune. The documents were from the Karasai District Court, and demanded that the owners of 13 homes in the commune destroy their homes, or they would be destroyed by the government at the expense of the owners. The documents did not specify a deadline.

13. (SBU) The next afternoon at approximately 1 p.m., several bulldozers, trucks, and three buses full of riot police arrived at the commune. The Karasai district akim and several court officials were also present. Govinda Swami, a leader of the Hare Krishna community, told Poloff that the police blocked all outside access to the area and cut electricity. The police were instructed by the court officials not to speak with the residents. (Note: Govinda Swami, an American citizen, leads the Hare Krishnas' effort to defend their land. On November 8, he left Kazakhstan on a short trip to India to generate support for their cause and conduct other business. His Kazakhstani visa expired a few days ago, and he expects to have difficulty obtaining a new one. He has maintained close telephone contact with his fellow Hare Krishnas at the commune. End note.)

14. (U) The police then began aggressively removing people from the targeted homes. According to Govinda Swami, several Hare Krishnas were beaten or roughed up by police when they resisted or protested, though none was seriously injured. He reported that two or three commune residents were arrested for resisting, and taken away by police. The police removed furniture and large possessions from the homes and put them in trucks, informing the residents that the items would be destroyed. Clothing and other smaller possessions were tossed into the snow. Thirteen houses were then demolished.

15. (SBU) Ninel Fokina, head of the Almaty Helsinki Committee, and Andrey Grishin, a reporter associated with the Kazakhstani International Bureau of Human Rights, evaded the police blockade and witnessed some of the demolitions. Both Fokina and Grishin confirmed the account from Govinda Swami. Grishin said that he personally witnessed the police attacking a few Hare Krishnas with their fists when the Krishnas resisted the eviction.

AUTHORITIES BLOCK, THREATEN JOURNALIST

16. (SBU) Grishin took multiple photos of the incident. When police spotted him taking photos, they chased him and seized his camera and journalist credentials. They returned his camera a half-hour later, minus its flash card and batteries. Nonetheless, most of Grishin's photographs survived in the camera's internal memory, and he plans to publicly release them. Grishin reported that after the police returned his camera, the Karasai district akim approached him and said he would "gouge out your eyes" if he saw Grishin taking photographs again. Grishin reported that the police also seized several cameras owned by commune residents.

17. (U) The authorities completed their work around 6 p.m., and lifted the blockade at approximately 7 p.m. The surviving homes remain without power and heat as a result of the demolition activity.

ACTION SURPRISES ASTANA

18. (U) The Hare Krishnas were surprised by the police action in part because a special commission appointed by the Ministry of Justice to evaluate the situation had not yet published its findings (reftel). Amanbek Mukhashev, deputy chairman of the Religious Issues Committee

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in the Ministry of Justice, is chairman of the commission, and promised that all legal actions against the Krishnas' property would be suspended pending publication of the commission's findings.

19. (SBU) The Ministry of Justice created the commission after the Kazakhstani Supreme Court ruled against the Hare Krishnas on August 24 (reftel). At the time, the Hare Krishnas charged that the commission was a mere smokescreen to deflect criticism of the government on the eve of the highly publicized Congress of World Religions, held in Astana on September 12-15. Nevertheless, the Hare Krishnas agreed to participate in the commission process.

10.(SBU) In subsequent conversations with Poloff, Govinda Swami characterized the commission as incompetent and subjective, and said that he did not expect a positive result. According to Govinda Swami and several media reports, Mukhashev stated publicly during some of the commission meetings that he already believed the dispute was purely legal in nature, and had nothing to do with the religious beliefs of the Hare Krishnas. (Note: Though most observers believe the Karasai district government's long campaign against the commune is essentially a heavy-handed attempt to confiscate valuable real estate, various local officials have criticized and attempted to undermine the Hare Krishnas as an illegitimate and threatening religious group. End note.) Despite their doubts about the sincerity of the commission, the Hare Krishnas believed that Karasai district officials would not take action pending the outcome of the commission process, and even then the Krishnas were planning further legal appeals.

11. (SBU) According to Govinda Swami, Mukhashev denied any knowledge of the planned demolitions when called by Krishna representatives during the incident, acknowledged that the commission had not yet publicized its findings, and expressed anger about being bothered while on vacation. Pol FSN contacted Kayrat Tolesov, another deputy chairman of the Religious Issues Committee, about the demolitions. Tolesov indicated he knew nothing about the issue, but was currently studying it. Swami reported that Krishna supporters made efforts to

contact other Religious Issue Committee officials, but none of them were aware of the planned demolitions, and in fact asked the Krishnas to talk to Karasai akimat officials and then report back to the Religious Issues Committee.

THE AFTERMATH

¶12. (SBU) The Hare Krishnas reported that government officials did not return to the commune on November 22, and residents were in a process of trying to salvage their possessions and clean up the mess. Govinda Swami reports that the Hare Krishnas plan an aggressive public relations campaign both within and outside of Kazakhstan. The Hare Krishnas have already contacted the human rights ombudsman and other human rights activists in Kazakhstan. Supporters outside of the country plan to approach Kazakhstani embassies in various capitals, and in some cases planned protest. Swami said he expects several hundred protesters to greet President Nazarbayev when he opens the London Stock exchange on November 22 in London.

¶13. (SBU) Rumors persist that Bulat Nazarbayev, brother of President Nazarbayev, is behind the land-grab. The Nazarbayev's native village of Chemulgan is located nearby.

COMMENT

¶14. (SBU) Comment: The heavy-handed tactics of the Karasai district authorities will likely cause embarrassment to the national government in Astana, and were likely conducted without Astana's full knowledge. Karasai authorities clearly acted without regard to the special commission, bolstering allegations that the commission was intended only as a smokescreen during the recent Congress of World Religions. The local authorities' willingness to take such reckless action, without regard to the impact on Kazakhstan's international image, will also fuel speculation that a powerful figure is behind the effort to take the Hare Krishnas' land. End comment.

SUGGESTED STATEMENT

¶15. (SBU) Posts suggest the following language for any statement or comment issued by the State Department:

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The United States is disappointed by the decision of Karasai district authorities to demolish several homes at the Hare Krishna commune outside of Almaty on November 21.

Homeowners were left in the cold, and many of their possessions were destroyed. The remaining residents are still without electricity and heat.

We have several concerns regarding the legal basis for the actions against the Hare Krishna community. Regardless of the merits of the underlying case, however, the sudden and forceful eviction of homeowners in freezing temperatures, and the destruction of their possessions, is inconsistent with principles of due process and fairness. It is particularly disturbing that the authorities chose to take such drastic action before the special commission charged with finding an equitable solution to the situation had issued its recommendations.

The United States government urges the Karasai district authorities to refrain from any further aggressive actions against the Hare Krishnas, and to work toward a fair, lawful, and peaceful resolution of the ongoing legal dispute.

ORDWAY